

# UC San Diego

## UC San Diego Previously Published Works

### Title

Anthropology and Moral Philosophy: A Symposium on Michael Banner's The Ethics of Everyday Life

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8296k5x2>

### Journal

The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology, 33(2)

### ISSN

0305-7674

### Authors

Banner, Michael  
Sharp, Lesley A  
Madsen, Richard  
et al.

### Publication Date

2015

### DOI

10.3167/ca.2015.330210

Peer reviewed

Review of The Ethics of Everyday Life by Michael Banner

“Specifying the Relationship Between Social Anthropology and Moral Theology”

John H. Evans  
Department of Sociology  
University of California, San Diego  
9500 Gilman Drive, MC 0533  
La Jolla, CA 92093-0533  
858-534-4972  
[jhevans@ucsd.edu](mailto:jhevans@ucsd.edu)

John H. Evans is professor of sociology at the University of California, San Diego. He is the author of two books that explain the origins of American public bioethical debate and one that examines religious people's views of reproductive genetics. He has also published articles on religion and politics and science and religion. He is currently writing a book tentatively titled *What is a Human? The U.S. Public's View and the Connection to Human Rights*.

## “Specifying the Relationship Between Social Anthropology and Moral Theology”

Michael Banner has written an erudite and engaging book that, at the most broad of levels, concerns how social science should have an impact on moral theology. It is intended as a “first word” not a “last word” – as the beginning of a conversation. I will take up that conversation, perhaps trying to utter the second and perhaps even third words, and looking for others to join in to the conversation Banner has so well provoked. My words focus on the particular question of how social science can and should influence theology. While Banner signals his interloper status in social science, I will signal my own interloper status by paraphrasing him: I am conscious of the fact that in matters theological I may be sharing “my ignorance unparsimoniously” (p.5).

In an essay buried in the thirtieth chapter in a never to be seen again, one-hundred-seventy-five dollar Handbook, my co-author and I focus upon four relationships between sociology and Christianity, primarily as systems of ideas {Evans and Evans 2012}. While anthropology and sociology are not the same, of which more below, in epistemological terms they are, so my earlier essay is relevant.

Most relevant here is that we identify two situations where sociology influences Christianity. The first is where scholars try to maintain an

epistemic wall where social science does not influence the ideas of Christianity, but may influence what Christianity does. Typically, sociology informs religious leaders or theologians about the practices or beliefs of the religious people themselves. For example, one use of my earlier work on what the religious public thinks about reproductive genetic technologies {Evans 2010a} is not to change the theological views of genetics, but to see how far off the public is from accepting theological ideas. This pattern does not fundamentally challenge either social science or theology.

The second relationship is sociological influence on theological ideas themselves. This also has a long history. Obviously liberation theology draws heavily on Marx, and H. Richard Niebuhr was said to have created a “sociological theology.” Hans Kung and Gregory Baum have been said to extensively use Marx, Hegel, Freud, Durkheim and Weber. It has been claimed that Bonhoeffer incorporated Toennies’ Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft distinction in his work {Roberts 1997a}. Postliberal or narrative theology was influenced by the ideas of anthropologist Clifford Geertz and the (extremely similar) ideas of sociologist Peter Berger {Placher 1997: 343}.

Peter Berger is the one scholar of which I am aware of who tried to create a theology that starts in sociology. This was most clearly articulated in his 1979 *Heretical Imperative* {Berger 1979} which builds on *A Rumor of*

*Angels* {Berger 1969}, where Berger was looking for “signals of transcendence” in everyday life. He wants to move beyond “deductive” theology that asserts religious truth a priori, to an “inductive” theology that works its way up from human experience to religious statements about the nature of reality. Thus, social science radically informs theological content itself.

#### THE TWO POSSIBLE RELATIONSHIPS PROPOSED

The qualities that Banner sees as attractive in anthropology as the conversation partner are clear. Theology needs a conversation with the everyday life of the public, and that can be had through anthropology. The purpose of the book is to “encourage the development of moral theology’s very own everyday ethics” (p.3), and “review and reconfigure” the relationship between moral theology and moral philosophy and social anthropology (p.3). However, Banner leaves the details of that relationship to the second or third words. The relationship is described as “engage” (18), “attend to” (23), and “reckon with” (125). At one point he calls for theology and anthropology to be “conversation partners,” (82) but what is the content of the conversation?

Banner uses a nice metaphor to say why theology might not be relevant to people’s lives. He says that to proclaim theological truth without

information about what the public thinks is like “a clarion call of the sort sounded by a trumpet played in deep space. However well the trumpet is played, no one will hear it” (p.16). Theology must be “psychologically and socioculturally realistic” or nobody is going to pay attention to it (p.17). However, it is unclear whether psychological and sociocultural realism extends to the Christian narrative itself, or whether the Christian narrative needs to be psychologically and socioculturally realistic about people’s everyday experiences.

In the theoretical statements at the beginning and end of the book, it sounds like theology itself will be modified by an encounter with data about everyday human experience learned from anthropology. This is the second relationship I describe above. He writes that before one gives a theological judgement on something, the product will be improved by fathoming “what we may casually refer to as the “unfathomable” choices and wishes of contemporary life” (p.16). Continuing, “A moral theology which cannot fully comprehend these desires and the life stances from which they come . . . fails in its intellectual responsibilities (p.16-17).

He moves quite close to implying that anthropology should influence theology itself when he writes that “social anthropology promises to challenge and correct moral theology, as well as deepen and advance it – it is not a matter here then, of anthropology simply providing tools ready to

hand for a moral theology which already knows very well what it is doing. I suggest that the encounter is more dynamic than that, and can be expected to tax and test moral theology, and in so doing, shape its own self-understanding" (28-29). Later he writes that anthropology "allows Christian moral theology to engage therapeutically or evangelically with these counter visions or conceptions (but also, as I have allowed, to learn from them)" (p.202). The last statement of "learning from" the conceptions identified by anthropology is as close as Banner gets to seeing the influence on theology of contemporary social practices reported via anthropology.

On the other hand, for most of the case studies, the relationship of anthropology and theology seems to be the first relationship I identify above where the content of the theology is not influenced by social science. One gets the sense that theology would remain the same, but the "realism" taken from anthropology is like a spotlight that shines on what actually matters to people's every day lives, and that theology would be much more relevant if it narrated that experience. For example, it is quite clear from the Alder Hey incident that ordinary people have a notion of the human body screaming out for theological narration, but theology is not aware of these notions because it does not pay attention to anthropology. Anthropology also shows the centrality of biological parenthood, the importance of kinship, and the social construction of the experience of aging and dementia. All of this

information will help theology make statements that are useful. But, in the details of these cases Banner shows no evidence of saying that any of these contemporary practices should change the theological narrative. In general, the substantive chapters do not show theology bending to contemporary empirical realities, but contemporary empirical realities showing topics that theology has ignored.

#### WHAT SHOULD THE RELATIONSHIP BE?

I think no one who takes theology seriously can disagree with the spotlight idea – of making moral theology more relevant by using social science to identify what people are really thinking and doing so that moral theology can engage exactly at that point. This maintains the “is-ought” distinction and does not challenge the traditional idea that theology is not created by people but by God. I see no downside in making theology relevant to the public. But, I think Banner could press beyond this.

I cannot help but make one churlish comment, which is that Banner should expand his conversation partner beyond anthropology to at least the U.S. version of sociology. I should note that I have the utmost respect for what in the U.S. is called “cultural anthropology” and the UK “social anthropology.” Some of my best friends are anthropologists. But, theology is universal and wants to talk at least beyond the local. However, anthropology is not universal and its method is the case study, often looking



not for the mundane but for the unusual case that has theoretical importance. It tends to focus on everyday lives, but of unusual groups of people. Hence, I am sure that the number of ethnographies of the unusual American pentecostals far outnumber the number of ethnographies of the exponentially more numerous boring old American Catholics. Because of its reliance on the small case study of unusual groups, anthropology may not be the best partner if you want to make universal claims – you may end up narrating the lives of small groups of unusual people. Instead, I advertise to you the discipline of sociology that makes the same sort of claims as social anthropologists, but at a more general level. For example, if theologians are interested in not being the trumpet call from outer space regarding how people think of work and money, I recommend both anthropological case studies and a sociological general population study {Wuthnow 1996} which can suggest whether the case study is representative of the population. How the public really thinks about work and money could use some theological narration.

Beyond the spotlight relationship, I think the next step in the conversation is whether anthropology should influence theology itself, and if so, how. Surely part of the trumpet from space phenomena is due to the socioculturally unrealistic aspects of theology itself. I finish with second and third words sketching out some issues in this sort of relationship.

In my own work I have pursued a path of very demarcated influence of social science on theology (and the humanities more generally) in a way that maintains the Enlightenment distinction between sociological knowledge and theological (and philosophical) knowledge. It is epistemologically shy. I simply limit my contribution to correcting the theological and humanistic claims that rely upon empirical assumptions about contemporary human behavior or belief. So, instead of bioethicists assuming they know the public's values about biotechnology, I propose measuring these values empirically {Evans 2012}. Instead of theologians assuming that believing in a theological anthropology makes a person treat others with "dignity," in a research project in process I test this claim empirically. This relationship is not very challenging because it allows the theologian to self-correct from within their own system in reaction to mistaken ventures out of that system into the world of empirical claims. However, if I were an eminent theologian, as Banner is, I might try something more ambitious.

Let me cautiously point out two features of Banner's project that distinguish it from other attempts to integrate social science and theology, as well as observation/reason and theology, that should be kept in mind, moving forward. Richard Roberts summarizes five possible relationships between theology and social sciences. One is that of H. Richard Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer, whose theology uses "sociology categories as part of his or her

essentially theological project” {Roberts 1997: 703}. Edward Farley and postliberal narrative theology are using similarly abstract sociological concepts about how discourse and communication work in communities {Roberts 1997: 707-708}. In contrast, Banner is advocating the use of concrete, close to the ground empirical facts about contemporary people’s behavior. What critics of social science influence on theology seem to dislike is the use of social science theories {Milbank 2006}, but the use of descriptions of what all of God’s children do sidesteps these criticisms.

A second observation, or perhaps suggestion, is to look at the existing models for the incorporation of natural science facts about the world into theology. There is Thomism, the “two books of God” (nature and the Bible), or more negatively, a “God of the gaps” relationship. For example, people close to a natural law perspective have looked to anthropology to say what a (God created) human “really” is, so that we can create a proper theology. In general, I think that at least the incorporation of provisional “social facts” into theology could have the same status as the incorporation of “natural facts.” At this point, I fear I have blundered into the unparsimonious sharing of my theological ignorance, so I will return the conversation to Banner for the next word.